

The Palestinians' Inalienable Right to Resist

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We remembered all the miseries, all the injustices, our people and the conditions they lived, the coldness with which world opinion looks at our cause, and so we felt that we will not permit them to crush us. We will defend ourselves and our revolution by every way and every means. – George Habash (1926-2008)

A freedom fighter learns the hard way that it is the oppressor who defines the nature of the struggle, and the oppressed is often left no recourse but to use methods that mirror those of the oppressor. – Nelson Mandela (1918-2013)

In December 1982, following Israel's devastating [invasion](#) of Lebanon six months earlier, the United Nations General Assembly passed resolution [A/RES/37/43](#) concerning the '[i]mportance of the universal realization of the right of peoples to self-determination'. It endorsed, without qualification, 'the inalienable right' of the Palestinian people to 'self-determination, national independence, territorial integrity, national unity and sovereignty without outside interference', and reaffirmed the legitimacy of their struggle for those rights 'by all available means, including armed struggle'. It also strongly condemned Israel's 'expansionist activities in the Middle East' and 'continual bombing of Palestinian civilians', both said to 'constitute a serious obstacle to the realization of the self-determination and independence of the Palestinian people'. In the four decades since then, Israel's violence against the Palestinian people and its colonisation of their land has not ceased. Up to the present moment, all over historical Palestine, from the Gaza Strip to Sheikh Jarrah, Palestinians are still under that same occupation, subject to suffocating control over virtually every aspect of their lives – and the sadistic, unaccountable violence of the Zionist state.

In addition to its endorsement by the UN, the Palestinians' right to resist their occupation is also guaranteed by international law. The [Fourth Geneva Convention](#) requires an occupying power to protect the 'status quo, human rights and prospects for self-determination' of occupied populations, and as Richard Falk – an expert in international law who later went on to be appointed the UN's Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories – has [explained](#), Israel's 'pronounced, blatant and undisguised' refusal to ever accept this framework of legal obligations constitutes a fundamental denial of the Palestinians' right to self-determination and engenders their legally-protected right of

resistance. Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory and its flagrant disregard for international law through the construction of illegal settlements and other daily violations has continued unabated since Falk's assessment was made during the al-Aqsa Intifada. In fact, the occupation has only become further entrenched since then with the collaboration of the comprador Palestinian Authority.

Furthermore, regardless of what is mandated by international law, the Palestinians possess a fundamental moral right to resist their ongoing colonisation and oppression through armed resistance, and that right must be recognised and supported. The multi-generational suffering of the Palestinians, perhaps none more so than those who live in the besieged and bombarded Gaza strip, is unremittingly cruel and has one central cause: Israel and the perpetual belligerence, expansionism and racism that is [inherent](#) to its state ideology, Zionism. Moreover, contrary to the Western media's [narrative](#) that, without fail, portrays Israel as acting in 'retaliation', it is the actions of the Palestinians which are fundamentally reactive in nature, because the violence that Israel inflicts upon them is both perpetual and structural, and therefore automatically precedes any resistance to it. 'With the establishment of a relationship of oppression, violence has already begun', said Paulo Freire; '[n]ever in history has violence been initiated by the oppressed'. In Palestine, as Ali Abunimah recently [wrote](#), 'the root cause of all political violence is Zionist colonisation'.

Given that the Palestinians' legal and moral right to pursue armed resistance is clear, endorsement of this position should be uncontroversial and commonplace among supporters of their cause. Yet in the West, such a position is rarely expressed – even by those who loudly proclaim their solidarity with Palestine. On the contrary, acts of Palestinian armed resistance, such as the firing of missiles from Gaza, are condemned by these ostensible supporters as part of the problem, dismissed condescendingly as 'futile' and 'counter-productive', or even labelled '[war crimes](#)' and '[unthinkable atrocities](#)', said to be comparable to Israel's routine collective punishment, torture, incarceration, bombardment and murder of Palestinians. This form of solidarity, as Bikrum Gill has [argued](#), is essentially 'premised upon re-inscribing Palestinians as inherently non-sovereign beings who can only be recognized as disempowered dependent objects to be acted upon, either by Israeli colonial violence, or white imperial protectors'.

To sit in the comfort and safety of the West and condemn acts of armed resistance that the Palestinians choose to carry out – always at great risk to their lives – is a deeply chauvinistic position. It must be stated plainly: it is not the place of those who choose to stand in solidarity with the Palestinians from afar to then try and dictate how they should wage the anti-colonial struggle that, as Frantz Fanon [believed](#), is necessary to maintain their humanity and dignity, and ultimately to achieve their liberation. Those who are not under brutal military occupation or refugees from ethnic cleansing have no right to judge the manner in which those who choose to confront their colonisers. Indeed, expressing solidarity with the Palestinian cause is ultimately meaningless if that support dissipates the moment that the Palestinians resist their oppression with anything more than rocks and can no longer be portrayed as courageous, photogenic, but ultimately powerless, victims. 'Does the world expect us to offer ourselves up as polite, willing and well-mannered sacrifices, who are murdered without raising a single objection?' Yahya al-Sinwar, Hamas' leader in Gaza, recently [asked](#) rhetorically. 'This is not possible. No, we have decided to defend our people with whatever strength we have been given.'

This phenomenon speaks to what Jones Manoel [calls](#) the Western left's 'fetish for defeat' that predisposes it towards situations 'of oppression, suffering and martyrdom', as opposed

to successful acts of resistance and revolution. Manoel continues:

People become ecstatic looking at those images – which I don't think are very fantastic – of a [Palestinian] child or teenager using a sling to launch a rock at a tank. Look, this is a clear example of heroism but it is also a symbol of barbarism. This is a people who do not have the capacity to defend themselves facing an imperialist colonial power that is armed to the teeth. They do not have an equal capacity of resistance, but this is romanticized.

As a result, large swathes of the Western left express solidarity with the Palestinian cause in a generalised, abstract way, overstating the importance of their own role, and simultaneously rejecting the very groups who are currently fighting – and dying – for it. All too often, those who have refused to surrender and steadfastly resisted at great cost, are condemned by people who, in the same breath, declare solidarity with the cause. Similarly, it is common for these same people to either ignore or demonise those external forces that materially aid the Palestinian resistance more than any others – most notably Iran. If this assistance is acknowledged, which is rare, the Palestinian groups that accept it are typically infantilised as mere 'dupes' or 'pawns', for allowing themselves to be used cynically by the self-serving acts of others – a sentiment that directly contradicts Palestinian leaders' own [statements](#).

A specific criticism of Hamas that is frequently deployed in this context is the 'indiscriminate' nature of its missile launches from Gaza, actions which both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International regularly label 'war crimes'. As [observed](#) by Perugini and Gordon, the false equivalence that this designation relies upon 'essentially says that using homemade missiles – there isn't much else available to people living under permanent siege – is a war crime. In other words, Palestinian armed groups are criminalised for their technological inferiority'. After the latest round of fighting in May 2021, al-Sinwar [stated](#) clearly that, unlike Israel, 'which possesses a complete arsenal of weaponry, state-of-the-art equipment and aircraft' and 'bombs our children and women, on purpose', if Hamas possessed 'the capabilities to launch precision missiles that targeted military targets, we wouldn't have used the rockets that we did. We are forced to defend our people with what we have, and this is what we have'.

This failure to support legitimate armed struggle is a part of a wider problem with the framing used by many supporters of the Palestinian cause in the West, that obscures its fundamental nature and how it must be resolved. Palestine is not simply a human rights issue, or even just a question of apartheid, but rather an anti-colonial fight for national liberation being waged by an indigenous resistance against the forces of an imperialist-backed settler colony. Decolonisation is a word now frequently used in the West in an abstract sense or in relation to curricula, institutions and public art, but rarely anymore in connection to what actually matters most: land. And that is the very crux of the issue: the land of Palestine must be decolonised, its Zionist colonisers deposed, their racist structures and barriers – both physical and political – dismantled, and all Palestinian refugees given the right of return.

It should be noted that emphasising the importance of supporting the Palestinians' right to carry out armed struggle in pursuit of their freedom does not mean that their supporters in the West should recklessly call for violence or fetishize and celebrate it unnecessarily. Nor does it mean that non-violent efforts such as the [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement](#) (BDS) are inconsequential or unimportant. Rather, BDS should be considered part and parcel of a broad spectrum of resistance activities, of which armed struggle is an

integral component. Samah Idriss, founding member of the Campaign to Boycott Supporters of Israel in Lebanon has [stated](#): '[b]oth forms of resistance, civil and armed, are complementary and should not be viewed as mutually exclusive.' Or, as Khaled Barakat has [stressed](#): 'Israel and its allies have never accepted any form of Palestinian resistance, and boycott campaigns and popular organizing are not alternatives to armed resistance but interdependent tactics of struggle'.

Nelson Mandela's [analysis](#) is relevant in this context, when he wrote that, '[n]on-violent passive resistance is effective as long as your opposition adheres to the same rules as you do', but if peaceful protest is met with violence, its efficacy is at an end'. For Mandela, 'non-violence was not a moral principle but a strategy', since 'there is no moral goodness in using an ineffective weapon'. Clarifying the rationale behind the African National Congress' decision to adopt armed resistance, Mandela explained that it had no alternative course left available: '[o]ver and over again, we had used all the non-violent weapons in our arsenal - speeches, deputations, threats, marches, strikes, stay-aways, voluntary imprisonment - all to no avail, for whatever we did was met by an iron hand'. This standpoint is reflected in the [words](#) of al-Sinwar, who when referring to the Great March of Return protests in 2018-19, during which Israeli snipers shot dead hundreds of Gazan protestors and seriously wounded thousands more said: 'we've tried peaceful resistance and popular resistance', but rather than acting to stop Israel's massacres, 'the world stood by and watched as the occupation war machine killed our young people'.

Mandela's reference to efficacy is crucial. Despite what many Western supporters seem intent on implying, although it comes at a huge cost, the Palestinian armed resistance in Gaza is not 'futile' and has grown enormously in effectiveness and deterrent capacity. This was already evident after Israel's failure to win the 2014 war on Gaza and has been underlined by the recent success of the resistance in May 2021, during which it launched an unprecedented number of missiles that can now reach deep inside historical Palestine. In spite of its devastating aerial bombardment of Gaza, Israel was unable to stop the launch of these missiles and, after the losses it experienced in 2014, is now too fearful of launching another ground invasion of the strip - notably as the resistance is now equipped with greater numbers of Kornet missiles previously used to such deadly effect against Israeli tanks in Southern Lebanon. The ceasefire that was declared on May 21st was widely seen in Israel as a defeat, and was celebrated by Palestinians across historical Palestine as a victory. The military balance has changed, and although Israel is still vastly more powerful by every conventional measure, the resistance is in a stronger position now than it has been for years. It has built upon the successes of Hezbollah against Israel in 2000 and 2006 and with the [support](#), training and further aid of the Lebanese group and others in the Resistance Axis, it has taken its capabilities to a higher level. This change is reflected in the fact that since 2014, Israeli arms sales have stagnated and its aggressions against Gaza no longer lead to an immediate rise in the stock price of its arms companies that use Gaza as a training ground and stage for its latest technologies. Shir Hever has [noted](#) that after Israel's failures in Gaza beginning in 2014, customers of its arms companies began to ask 'What is the point of all this technology? If you cannot pacify the Palestinians with these missiles, why should we buy them?'

In addition to its practical impact, armed struggle has significant propaganda value. The reality is that Palestine would not have dominated global news headlines in May 2021 in the way that it did were it not for the armed resistance in Gaza that - contrary to the Western media's singular focus on Hamas - is composed of a united front of various factions

including Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and the Marxist-Leninist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). The PFLP is a case in point in this regard, for it was their actions throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, most notably a series of plane hijackings (in which passengers were released unharmed), that implanted the Palestinian cause in the consciousness of millions of people for the first time and marked a key turning point in raising awareness of the Palestinians' plight globally. Indeed, the Palestinian writer and PFLP spokesman, Ghassan Kanafani, [believed](#) that armed struggle was the 'best form of propaganda' and that in spite of the 'gigantic propaganda system of the United States', it is through people who fight to liberate themselves in armed struggle 'that things are ultimately decided'.

In 1970, after the Western-backed regime in Jordan had shelled Palestinian refugee camps in the country, the PFLP - under the leadership of Kanafani's comrade (and recruiter) George Habash - took hostage a group of nationals from the US, West Germany and Britain (Israel's primary supporters) at two hotels in Amman. In return for their safe release, the PFLP [demanded](#) that 'all shelling of the camps be ended and all demands of the Palestinian resistance movement met'. Shortly before the hostages were eventually released, Habash [addressed](#) them apologetically and said:

I feel that it's my duty to explain to you why we did what we did. Of course, from a liberal point of view of thinking, I feel sorry for what happened, and I am sorry that we caused you some trouble during the last 2 or 3 days. But leaving this aside, I hope that you will understand, or at least try to understand, why we did what we did.

Maybe it will be difficult for you to understand our point of view. People living different circumstances think on different lines. They can't think in the same manner, and we, the Palestinian people, and the conditions we have been living for a good number of years, all these conditions have modelled our way of thinking. We can't help it. You can understand our way of thinking, when you know a very basic fact. We, the Palestinians... for the last 22 years, have been living in camps and tents. We were driven out of our country, our houses, our homes and our lands, driven out like sheep and left here in refugee camps in very inhumane conditions.

For 22 years our people have been waiting in order to restore their rights, but nothing happened... After 22 years of injustice, inhumanity, living in camps with nobody caring for us, we feel that we have the very full right to protect our revolution. We have all the right to protect our revolution...

We don't wake up in the morning to have a cup of milk with Nescafe and then spend half an hour before the mirror thinking of flying to Switzerland or having one month in this country or one month in that country... We live daily in camps... We can't be calm as you can. We can't think as you think. We have lived in this condition, not for one day, not for 2 days, not for 3 days. Not for one week, not for 2 weeks, not for 3 weeks. Not for one year, not for 2 years, but for 22 years. If any one of you comes to these camps and stays for one or two weeks, he will be affected.

You have to excuse my English. From the personal side, let me say, I apologize to you. I am sorry about your troubles for 3 or 4 days. But from a revolutionary point of view, we feel, we will continue to feel that we have the very, very full right to do what we did.

Habash's words should be listened to carefully. The urgency that underlines his message is

even more palpable half a century later, for the Palestinians – consistently refusing passive victimhood – have now lived in the wretched conditions Habash depicts for 73 long years, not 22.

Revolution, Mao Zedong once [remarked](#), ‘is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle’. The same is true of decolonisation, in which although past struggles have been multi-faceted, armed resistance of some kind was almost invariably an integral component of the struggle. Palestine is no exception. Beyond endorsement of BDS and other civil society campaigns, the Palestinians’ unassailable right to pursue armed struggle must be supported by those who choose to stand in solidarity with them and their righteous cause.

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